

COMMUNITY NEWS

Wednesday, April 5, 2006 • Page A-4

Council agrees on library parking

■ How policy will be implemented, funded remain uncertain

BY WARREN PARISH
AND JANEL DAVIS
STAFF WRITERS

Parking should be free at all of the county's 21 libraries, the Council decided Tuesday.

The 6-2 vote opens the door to free parking at the new Rockville library, scheduled to open this fall, and the Bethesda Library, which charges for parking until 2 p.m. to keep commuters away.

"This is not a litmus test on whether someone is supportive of libraries, it should be the policy of the county to have unimpeded access to libraries," Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, who sponsored the resolution in February, said Tues-

"I'm glad this issue is coming to the forefront. But we've been begging for money every year [during budget season] for other necessities. Many of the libraries need their rugs cleaned, carpet replaced, new shelves . . . I hope these things receive the same amount of attention."

— Anne Kilcullen, chairwoman of the library board and member of the Chevy Chase Library community

day. "This \$1 per hour charge [paid at some garages] is a significant part of the take-home pay of many county workers . . . and constitutes a de facto admissions fee."

Council President George L. Leventhal, who opposed removing

paid parking in Bethesda, and Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner cast the dissenting votes. Councilman Steven A. Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring was absent.

"The question of a free . . . is a question of . . .

building, not with how [people] got there," said Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton.

The resolution will trigger unnecessary spending, obligating the county to about \$500,000 per year in Rockville's case, argued Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

A validation system would cost \$15,000 and between \$425,000 and \$525,000 annually, council staffers estimated. Parker Hamilton, director of Montgomery County Public Libraries, cautioned that those were rushed estimates.

Tuesday's resolution follows weeks of public pressure. In February, Andrews urged the county to offer free parking at the Rockville Library, which sparked debate over who would pay for it — the county, the city or the library users.

The city is building the . . . of the club. Single membership for . . . and family member . . . Participants under . . .

LIBRARIES

■ Continued from Page A-4

ing garages, which represent the vast majority of available parking for the planned library in the Town Square redevelopment project. The city planned on charging for parking in the 1,000 public slots within the garages.

Plans for paid parking at the proposed Silver Spring and Shady Grove branches also will have to be changed. Bethesda is the only full-time library that does not have free parking.

A memo from Hamilton estimated a free parking program could exceed \$1 million a year.

"I know this is a well-intentioned motion, but I think this is a mistake and I'm voting against it," Leventhal said before Tuesday's vote.

After the vote, Hamilton said no decisions have been made on an implementation strategy, including what effect Tuesday's resolution would have on upcoming library budget talks. It is also unknown whether more staff will be needed to monitor the libraries' parking spaces.

County executive candidates were asked about the parking problem last week during a library-issues debate sponsored by the Chevy Chase Friends of the Library club.

"I'm glad this issue is coming to the forefront," said Anne Kilcullen, chairwoman of the library board and member of the Chevy Chase Library Community. "But we've been begging for money every year [during budget season] for other

necessities. Many of the libraries need their rugs cleaned, carpet replaced, new shelves ... I hope these things receive the same amount of attention."

Debate organizers, many members of Kilcullen's group, worry that the money needed to pay for the free parking would be taken from the already strained library budget. As part of the parking discussion, one group member challenged the candidates to look elsewhere for the money.

"Providing money for core services in the library department has been a problem over the last 10 years, do you think it just for the county to appropriate \$700,000 or more per year to provide 'free' parking?" read the question.

The cost of the free-parking policy and necessary validation technology has not been determined, but supporters say those are details that can be worked out. Andrews advocated establishing a nondepartmental account or "place holder" in the county budget, so the library budget is not affected.

Supporters praised Tuesday's vote.

"The American tradition of free access to public libraries has been restored," said Rockville resident Irwin Charles Cohen, who lobbied the County Council for free parking.

More than 800 county residents signed a petition calling for free parking.